Engineer Memoirs

MAJOR GENERAL R. S. KEM

U.S.A. Retired

Major General R. S. "Sam" Kem, Deputy Chief of Engineers, 13 July 1990.

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Early Years and West Point

Q: I'd like to start at the beginning—when you were born, where, and something about your parents.

A: Well, I was born 9 August 1934 in Richmond, Indiana. My parents, Charles and Janice Kem, had grown up in the vicinity of Richmond, Indiana, which is in Wayne County. They lived in Williamsburg, Indiana, which is five, six miles north of Richmond. My father had gone to Indiana University Dental School; my mother to Earlham College, which is in Richmond. When he began his dental practice, it was just across the Ohio line in New Paris, Ohio; and so they were living in New Paris at the time, but that community used the Richmond hospitals, which is why I was born in Richmond.

So, that was 1934, and we lived there—I don't know how long, two or three years, and then my parents moved to Richmond and lived at 25 Southwest Fourth Street, and Dad practiced dentistry in Richmond. He had practiced before in New Paris and a little bit in Richmond. Then he moved all of it to Richmond. In about 1941 we built a home, or we were building it in '41, and we moved in '42 into a home on the outskirts of Richmond, 1000 Henley Road, and I really spent the rest of my boyhood growing up in that home. It was just outside the city limits, so we went to county schools. I went to Riley School and Riley Junior High School.

Q: Is that James Whitcomb Riley?

A: I think so.

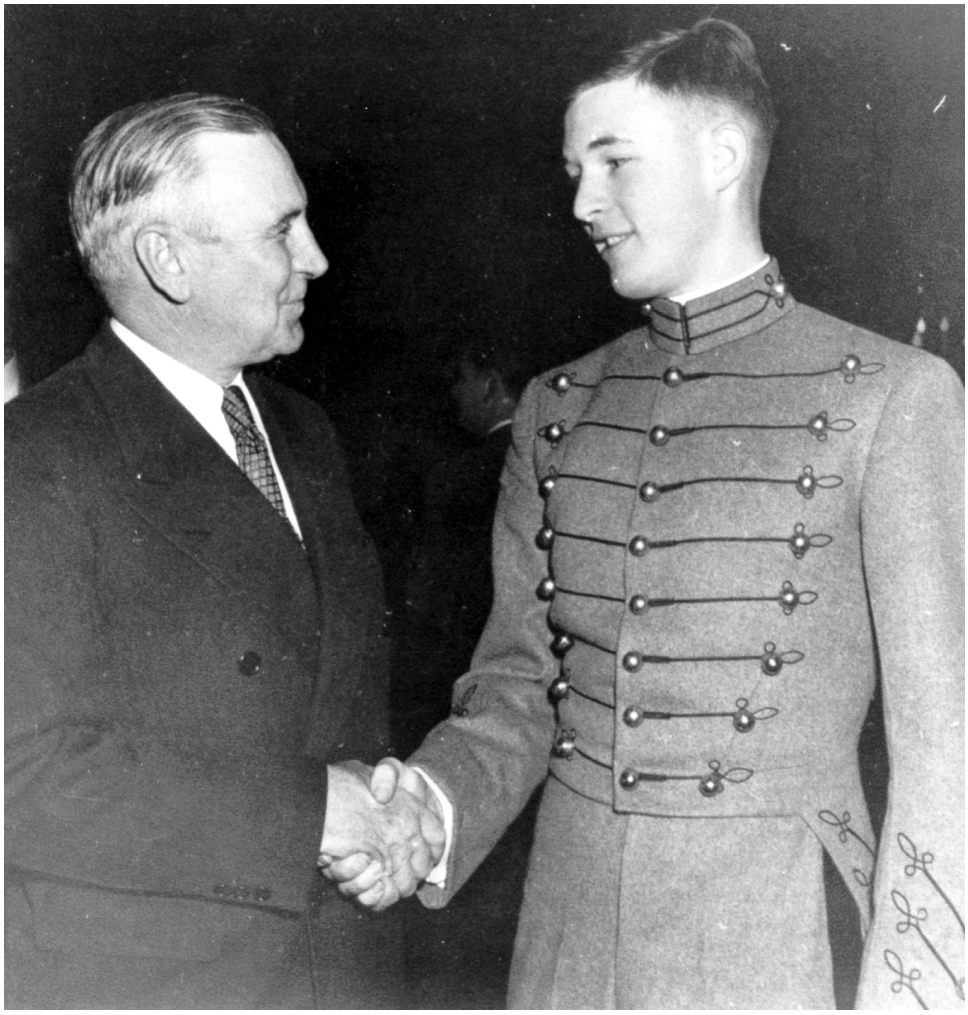
Q: I know he's a Hoosier, but I wasn't sure where he was from.

A: I'm sure it is. He may be from Greencastle. I'm not sure.

But then, come the tenth grade, Riley School students went on to Richmond Senior High School. I then spent my three years in Richmond Senior High School, graduating in 1952.

Q: How did you get interested in going to West Point?

A: Well, I didn't really know a lot about West Point, knew very little. One day my father suggested that perhaps I should consider it, about the time I was beginning to look toward college, two years away. I guess he suggested it because I really wasn't yet into that mode of looking on to colleges, but for West Point you need to do that earlier than you do for other colleges. He indicated that I had to go through the congressional process, so I wrote my congressman, Ralph Harvey.



Cadet Kem met with Congressman Ralph Harvey, who had appointed him to West Point, in the Hotel Willard after marching in the Eisenhower inauguration parade in January 1953. Harvey represented Indiana's 10th Congressional District.

He was 10th District congressman. I told him I was interested and he sent me a note, told me what the process was. It started off with an exam at the post office in Richmond during the summer of 1951, and that would have been between my junior and senior year in high school. I took the exam. I still wasn't necessarily motivated for West Point, but now I was starting my senior year where I would start looking toward college and universities. I applied to Purdue and to Indiana and continued the process toward West Point.

Sometime, perhaps the fall, I was notified by him that I would receive his second alternate appointment. Later that fall, probably around December, he told me that I was now his first alternate, that one of the two had for some reason declined, so I should plan to take the official entrance examination now. The previous exam at the post office was only for assisting Congressman Harvey to rank order his people.

I went to Fort Knox, Kentucky, in the late February or March time frame of '52 and took the entrance examination. That includes both medical exam, physical aptitude test, and academic tests.

Meanwhile, I was going to continue pointing toward either Purdue or Indiana. I went to the rush parties for the fraternities during the appropriate weekends during that year at both universities. Somewhere around April I had a call at the high school. In the middle of an afternoon class someone came to the door and asked for me and said Congressman Harvey was on the phone. So, I left the class and went down to the main offices and took his call. He said he wanted to know my decision as to whether I wanted to go or not because I was now his principal nominee. The other one had fallen out somehow. I told him I'd call him back the next day and give him my decision. So, I went home, thought it over, called him back the next day, and told him I would accept the appointment.

Q: Let's go back just a minute. Do you know why your father suggested the idea of going to West Point. Did he have a military background at all?

A: No, he didn't, and I don't know why.

Q: Were you the only child? Did you have siblings?

A: I had three brothers.

Q: Three brothers—younger?

A: Next one three years away, then two and two. Four boys. All grew up together. We lived just outside town, so it was rural. We had a three-acre place with a big field in the front yard. It was a gathering place for the 18 or 20 kids in the neighborhood for whatever sport was in season.

Q: None of your younger brothers decided to go to West Point too?

A: No. My father was a dentist and later specialized in oral surgery. He wanted one of us to be a dentist; none of us were. Two of us eventually became engineers—me, a military engineer, and my brother Jan, who is a civil engineer and currently working in his own practice up in Newark, New York. He was the third son. So, one and three became engineers, two and four went into medicine. My brother David, the second oldest, is now a teaching and research physician at the University of Oklahoma Medical School and Chief of the Department of Endocrinology. My brother Bill, the youngest, does research and teaches as a professor of pharmacology at the University of Florida.

Q: This is another question out of order. Perhaps I should have asked earlier. The origin of your last name, "Kem." Is it an old English name?

A: Well, we really don't know, but I'll tell you as briefly as I can what we know. My father really did a lot of research into the area. We know what happened within the United States, which was not the origin of the name. But Kems came to the United States, to America, from England early on in Revolutionary times. They settled in Virginia and North Carolina, and then later made the trek to the west and settled in Richmond, Indiana, and went on to Missouri. Senator James Kem from Missouri, who was in office I guess in the late '40s, early '50s, was from the Missouri branch.

My parents were Quaker, and I grew up inside the Society of Friends. Richmond is the home of the Quaker Five-Year Meeting, thus the central home. So, part of the Kem migration west was with the Quakers when they came to Richmond.

How we came to this country from England has been put together, and it seems plausible, but I'm not sure it's certain. In the research that my father had done, it seems that most short names are either shortened from something else, though we have no indication of that, or come from Asia. It's thought that perhaps the Mongols' move north into Russia was part of that. We do know, up in the northwestern parts of Russia, White Russia, that there's a town named Kem. Then Dad suspected a migration across into Finland. There's a river and a town named Kemi in Finland. Then, supposedly followed a migration down into northern Germany. There was, as I found out later when talking to German Army counterparts in Germany, such a migration into the northern parts of Germany in what was called the Dettmarshes. From there, we believe the Kems followed historical migration to England.

We don't know that we were part of each of those migrations. We just know that there was a pattern established and that we've only found the name existing in that one particular region. So, it sounds plausible, but it's not certain. It's not a very common name. You don't find many in this country. As we traveled around the United States, which we did quite a bit after World War II, my father would always look in the phone books in each of the big towns we'd go to, and maybe in Denver we'd find one, and maybe here or there we'd find the name, but seldom did we find many.

There was one other Kem in the United States Army in my earlier years—of course, there's another one now because my son John is in. We came together one night, but I didn't even go to meet him. That sounds pretty bad, but I had just arrived in Vietnam on my second tour and was sent to the replacement depot down in Long Binh. At that point in 1968 you were herded there like cattle when you arrived. I was a major (P) [promotable], and I was supposed to go command a battalion. We arrived late in the evening, about nine o'clock, after a very long, tiring ride from the United States. We were told, "Go find yourself a bunk," and they were three deep all over those buildings. I mean, it was really like a corral. We were told, "Nothing will happen with you tonight. Your records will go into our screen tomorrow morning, so go enjoy the evening. Can't call anybody, can't do anything, can't leave, and we'll call you when we need you in the morning after we start the replacement processing stream."

So, about one o'clock in the morning, after I'd really conked out, I was awakened and told, "Get up. You're going to deploy this morning. Your orders are through."

I said, "I'm not; it can't be me. You know my records aren't going to go to the processing center until the morning, so I'm going to go back to sleep."

"No, you've got to get ready. You've got to catch the airplane in an hour and a half."

I said, "Well, who do I talk to?"

He said, "You can't talk to anybody. You turn in all your bedding."

So, I got up, and I was really groggy. I got all my gear together. There were no lights, and there were all these bunks and people and bags all over the floor. I'd stumble, trip, fall, cuss, and others were doing the same thing. I finally stumbled out, went in, and said, "Okay, what's going on? I mean, it must be a mistake."

They said, "You're on your way to Pleiku." My first thought was, "Oh, no, I've spent one tour at Pleiku already. I'd really like to see some other place in this country than go back to Pleiku." He said, "Nope; your name's Kem, isn't it?"

I said, "Right."

He said, "Well, here it is." Gave me my orders, and it was for Captain—I was a major at the time—it was for Captain Kem, Chemical Corps. So, there was another Kem in the Army. I turned back to the person and said, "You better go find him. He's only got about 30 minutes left."

I had turned my bedding in, and I was also still groggy. I only wanted to go back to sleep. That's why the other Captain Kem and I never met. I did luck out in that. Since they were sending people out, there were some field grade billets available with four or five to a room rather than a hundred.

Q: It's interesting, for the later migration to this country, the Quakers suffered some religious persecution in England, I think, didn't they? I think maybe even later on the East Coast, so that may have helped propel the family over this way.

Well, back to your decision to go to West Point. In the interim, from the time when you first applied until you got this telephone call and had to make your decision, had you learned any more about West Point? Or was everything still up in the air in terms of what decision you would make?

A: Well, it was all very much up in the air. I had learned more about it. I'd read the catalog by this time and seen one of the old Hollywood movies. In fact, I didn't know a great deal about West Point. I knew it was a very good education. So, I was still weighing all of my opportunities. Since I'd only been an alternate to West Point, I thought that was never going to jell as the principal, and I would probably pick between Indiana and Purdue. My inclination had been, because I seemed to be better at math and the sciences, to go to Purdue and be an engineer. Yet, I really liked the Indiana campus and what was going on there. So, I

was still kicking it around, but I would have probably ended up at Purdue had the principal appointment not come through.

Q: Were you in athletics in high school? As far as on a team?

A: No, I never made any of the varsity teams. I was always very interested in athletics, and that was the center of my activities in grade school and junior high school. I was always with all the folks at recess or after school and played baseball or football. Those activities took place in our front yard, so I was very much into it. Basketball was always a big sport with me. Riley never had a football team, just had basketball and baseball, and I always played with those teams.

When I went to high school, I never made the cuts. So, I didn't make the basketball team or the baseball team. I ran cross-country my first year, primarily because I was told that would give me a leg up on basketball because I'd be in better shape.

Q: That's what you really wanted to do?

A: Right. What I really wanted to do was make the basketball team.

Q: That's right. In Indiana basketball is a sport to aspire to, right?

A: We had the hoops everywhere—our backyard, the next-door neighbor's barn. So, just wherever the game was that night, we'd go one-on-one, two-on-two, three-on-three, or whatever the game was.

Q: One of the reasons I ask that question is to lead up to the next one. It's about what some interviewees have described as the shock of the plebe year at West Point. How was it that first year?

A: It was a shock, just as you said. The cultural change was rather significant, and as much as I thought I was aware of things, I was unprepared for how shocking it would be. My uncle had been in the Navy. He called me and gave me counsel that I needed to be ready for the change and be prepared to "keep a stiff upper lip and not get too emotional and to take it," and that sort of thing. It was a shock from day one.

There's an interesting anecdote that a lot of people have enjoyed, so I might as well tell it here. When you go up to West Point, on the very first day, you're lined up until some firstclassman comes to get you and leads you over to the company to which you've been assigned. There they start the in-processing, which includes getting your uniforms issued, getting you to the barber shop for your first haircut, and teaching you how to march a little bit so you can at least march that afternoon down to Trophy Point and take the commissioning oath.

So, to start that process you're with whomever you're lined up with. About eight of us were marched off to Fifth New Cadet Company with our suitcases. I happened to be first in line when we stopped, and he gave us a right face. So, he said, "Drop that bag," and of course we

didn't drop it fast enough, so we all got a little chewing. He started the process of understanding discipline and immediate obeying of orders and that sort of thing. After a little of that, he came and stood in front of me. Well, as my uncle had said, "You want to start off right, and keep a low profile and go along with the game," so I was mentally prepared to do that. He took one look at me with his chin inches in front of mine and said, "So, what's your name?"

And I said, "Sam Kem, Sir."

And he said, "From now on, you are New Cadet Kem, Sir. You understand that?"

"Yes, Sir."

"So, what's your name?"

Well, he had spoken so quickly, it had all slurred together, so I thought he said "Newcadumpsir." So, I said, "My name is Newcadumpsir."

Looking astonished, he said, "What did you say?"

I said, "Newcadumpsir."

He said, "Say that again," looking agitated.

"Newcadumpsir."

And he says, "Now, let's go over that one more time. Your name is New Cadet Kem, Sir. You understand that?" Only he still slurred it together. It sounded the same to me.

So, I came back with, "Newcadumpsir"—because I knew, having been to some of those fraternity things down at Indiana University, that you play these kinds of games. Certainly I knew one of your best principles is to never deviate from your position.

So, the more he tried to correct me, the more I hung fast to Newcadumpsir. Finally, after two or three minutes of this, he—rolling his eyes in frustration—moved two steps to the left to the next new cadet in line, Mario Nicolais. Mario was of Italian background, olive skinned, Mediterranean looking, where I'm very fair. He looked at Mario Nicolais—we were great friends later, having just met moments before—and said, "All right, Mister, what's your name?"

Mario Nicolais was no dummy. He knew that to stay out of trouble, you played along, and he said, "Newcadumpsir." The firstie looked at him, then looked back to me—my very fair skin—looked back at the olive-skinned Mario and said, "You two brothers?"

"No, Sir."

"Then what's your name?"

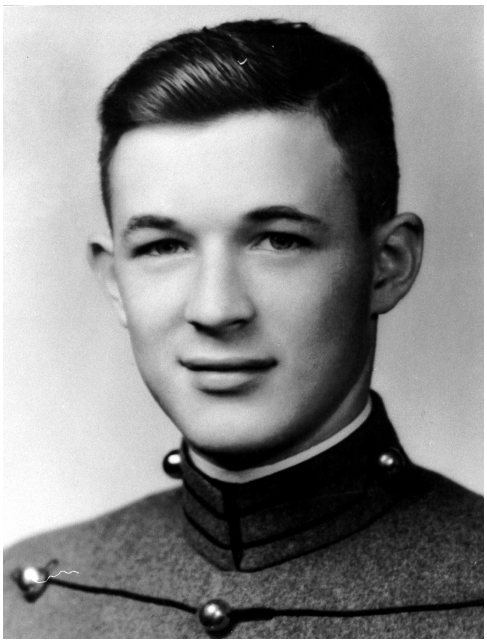
"Newcadumpsir," Mario said without flinching. The firstie finally sorted it all out after that.

I have told that story, with encouragement from my wife, Ann, a thousand times, and Mario has told it. We met up at a reunion 10 years ago and he said to his kids, "He's the one that was part of the Newcadump story."

Q: Well, you develop some strong friendships in that first year, generally, and I noticed there are a number of engineers in your class. Every class has a number of engineers. Could you talk about some of them?

A: You do develop strong friendships—because of the cultural shock. They work to get rid of the civilian in you and your upbringing and start the remolding process from a common base. Because you endure with others the same kind of pains, deprivations, and challenges, you do start a bonding process that carries on for a lifetime. Now, there are friends and nonfriends, and the people you like and don't like, like every other place; but because you have gone through a common experience, you start developing those kinds of friendships.

So, yes, plebe year you start that, but it really goes over all four years and continues beyond. I don't know that my plebe year friendships necessarily have been the most enduring. Surely, some of my classmates, those who have gotten out of the Army over time, we've lost contact. Throughout the four years there were other friendships that we developed, other contacts with other people. Jim Ellis, now retired, was in the other regiment across the way. Somehow we met on the steps of the mess hall one time, started talking, and developed a start of a friendship. We have been assigned together many times, gone to civil school at the same time, been in 3d Armored Division together, and later I followed him. I followed him in the 82d Airborne Division; I followed him into Fort Belvoir. I don't know if we met plebe year or not, but it was early on there that we met.



Cadet "Sam" Kem

Another classmate, Jim McNulty—whom I don't recall meeting as a cadet—went engineers, and I went engineers. We met at Fort Belvoir in the basic course and went on to the Ranger School where we were buddies. That is another place where you have the bond of enduring and going through a tough experience very closely, and so we have been fast friends over the years.

As a group, our class has remained close. We still meet quarterly for lunch at Fort McNair. I went to the last one a week ago. There were 30 classmates there. We must have 80 to 100 in the area. So, those kinds of bonds remain.

Q: Well, there were a number of well-known—to me, at least—engineer general officers in your class.

A: Eight.

Q: I was looking down the list. A name that's prominent in the news today, General [Norman] Schwarzkopf, was in your class.

A: When I said eight, I meant eight engineer general officers. We always felt we were a good class. We were brought up well. We started at West Point during the Korean War. We went in on the 1st of July 1952, so Korea ended while we were there. We had tactical officers who had reached some relatively high rank during World War II, like General Mike Davison who had been class of '39—not too far out, let's see, 13, 14 years out of the academy. He was a colonel and had been a brigade commander in the war. Later he went on to get his fourth star and command USAREUR [U.S. Army, Europe]. He was our regimental commander.

Most of the company-level tactical officers and many of the other staff had returned from Korea where they'd spent a year or more. For example, my company, which was Company I–1—we had two regiments in those days, companies A through M, in each of the two regiments—lived in the South Area, which was horseshoe-shaped. Across the quadrangle the Company M–1 tactical officer was Captain Al Haig. Captain George Patton had another company, and Captain Bob Haldane came in to be our tactical officer. All of these folks, who later rose to stars and fame, had been in Korea already, so they were back to take care of us.

That wasn't your question. Your question had to do with, I guess, Norm Schwarzkopf, and I was talking about the class in general. We, as I mentioned, had a very cohesive class, and we maintained that. I don't know what the number is—something like 25, 27 made general officer. Ten of the class were killed in Vietnam; we all served there in our captain, major, and lieutenant colonel years. I served there as a captain and lieutenant colonel. Norm Schwarzkopf now commands our Central Command in our Middle East forces. Classmate John Foss commands TRADOC [Training and Doctrine Command]; we were fellow commandants together when he was at the Infantry School and I was at the Engineer School.

At that time, as it had been true for Jim Ellis, too—I followed Jim Ellis as commandant of the Engineer School—you could go to meetings at TRADOC or CAC [Combined Arms Center] and find many classmates there. There'd be John Foss from the Infantry School; Dave Palmer, now the superintendent of West Point, was at that time the commandant of the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth; Tom Weinstein had the Intelligence School; Rick Brown had the Armor School. So, we had Engineer, Infantry, Armor, Fort Leavenworth, Military Intelligence, so there are five commandants.

So, we've always had that interaction of classmates. You see people here and there. Even back in Germany, in the 3d Armored Division on a Winter Shield exercise, I was driving down the road near Schweinfurt and there was a Jeep off in the ditch. I pulled over to see if I could help, and it was my good friend Jim Ellis, infantry platoon leader. I helped pull him out, and he went on his way. So, those things happen again and again throughout a career.

Q: General Gar Davidson was the superintendent when you were there?

A: No. Let me see. General Frederick Irving was there when I arrived. General Blackshear Bryan's the one that I remember the most. Gar Davidson probably took over from Bryan the summer following our graduation.

Q: I interviewed him. I didn't go back and check my notes to see exactly the time frame he was there, but it was at some point.

A: General Mike Michaelis was one of the commandants. General Edwin Messinger replaced him.

Q: It's the tactical officers who probably had more influence over cadets, isn't it?

A: They had and have a very close relationship and influence. You're influenced by the instructors too. Certainly one of my reasons for going engineers was because some of the instructors that I thought the most of were engineers. I can't probably pull all the names back, but Captains Rank, McConnell, and Rochefort were some of them. Captain McAdoo was another. Their general demeanor, approach, and professionalism was attractive. I don't recall going up and talking to them so much as just observing them.

My intent when I went there was probably never to make it a career. I was not fixed on a military career as an outcome. I went there still having thoughts about Purdue University and being an engineer, with an inclination towards military engineering. I didn't know much about the other branches.

As I carried through until my final week, I more or less maintained that inclination. In the final week before branch drawing, as often happened—I went back later as a tactical officer, so I observed this in the cadets at that time—in my final week I started having second thoughts. "Am I making the right choice? Maybe I should go infantry or armor" because I liked the leadership aspects and I liked the unit aspects of troop duty. Was I going to get sufficient troop kind of time in the engineers, because I enjoyed that part of what we had done up there? So, I then went to various folks and did a lot of hard talking on infantry and armor. The armor folks in the Office of Military Instruction took me under wing, and I had quite a conversation with them. The night before branch selection I came to grips with myself and decided, "You don't think one way for a lot of months and then, quick knee-jerk, make a change."

Some years later, I was the acting regimental tactical officer because Bob Haldane—I was lieutenant colonel at that time, and the executive officer/S–3 of the 2d Regiment, my regimental commander, was the same Colonel Bob Haldane who as a captain had been my Company I–1 tactical officer—was off to Harvard for the advanced management course. So, I was the acting regimental commander at the time of branch choice for the class of '70. The cadet regimental commander, who had been going infantry for all these years, on the next to the last night came in to me and said he thought he'd go engineers instead. I went back to my own experiences, told him the story. I said, "You know, you don't have an inclination for a

lot of months and then make a knee-jerk reaction. You're probably wrong. You might be happy both places. Why is it that you think that you've been wrong all this time? Better think about this one." So, he went infantry.

Q: Everyone realizes that that's an important decision. Well, maybe not everyone, but lots of cadets realize they're making an important decision when they make this branch decision and try to give it some careful thought.

A: Well, you always hope so. I know I did. I thought everybody was doing it the same way. When you're acting as the tactical officer, you begin to wonder about some folks. As much as you're working on it because some of the questions you get asked—"Well, would I be more likely to get Fort Carson if I go air defense or armor?"—make you begin to wonder if they're really motivated by the right kinds of things.

So, I say it's probably a mixed bag out there as to what's driving them, what's motivating them. It is a big decision, and although you can change things down the line a couple of years—and a lot of folks do—nevertheless, it's nice if you get it right the first time, which I fortunately did.

Q: Well, I've seen a lot of interviews with officers who went to West Point in the '30s and into the '40s. During that time it was difficult to get into the engineers. You made your choice based on class standing, and those slots went early. I think that was still the case when you were making your decision.

A: Yes. As I recall, I was something like 63 out of our class of about 480. I don't know where engineers went out, somewhere on the order of 120 or 140, I believe. About 34 classmates went engineers.

At that time we still had 25 percent of our class who went into the Air Force. So, of the 480, about 360 went Army and 120 went Air Force.

Q: I guess the big competing choices were Air Force and armor out of the top half of the class?

A: Yes, armor was, but engineers went out first. Air Force because the numbers went down quite a ways. You basically had to want to be Air Force—people made their pick one way or the other, Army or Air Force.

Within the Army, though, armor was a strong choice because there were such strong armor personalities at West Point in the tactical department. General [James F.] Hollingsworth, later a major commander in Vietnam, Korea, all around, was very flamboyant. The stories he would tell of armor and cavalry! When we'd go into our military training, he really ignited the class and really brought out this feeling of mobility and fire power of armor. This was the branch that knew how to do things. I remember two instances still vividly today.

One of them was an evening lecture. There were dialogues going on in our nation then about the future and, of course, we're talking '55, '56, we're talking about McCarthy hearings of the Secretary of the Army, and we're talking the Cold War and the Soviet Union. I still

remember Hollingsworth, who was then a lieutenant colonel, standing in front of us saying he knew what to do about the Soviet Union. What he'd do was just get some tanks, put the class of '56 in those tanks, and roar off toward Russia, and they could probably take care of anything. So, he got a hoorah out of the class because he was that kind of a person.

I remember a couple of years before, we were at Camp Buckner in summer training, sitting in the bleachers. We were receiving artillery instruction from one of the artillery cadre, a captain. The instructor was telling us, "Now, when those tanks come around, we're just going to bring in artillery and ring it in on those tanks." Hollingsworth then just stepped around the side of the bleachers and gave a wary eye at the instructor for preaching this kind of stuff, which obviously was heresy to him. Everybody really took from that that you went with Hollingsworth.

We had some crusty veterans who had fought in World War II and Korea and airborne types, like Colonel Julian Ewell, who still maxed the physical training test. The kinds like Colonel [William J.] McCaffrey, deputy commandant, and later Generals Mike Davison, Hollingsworth, Haig, Haldane, [Thomas M.] Rienzi, and all of those caliber of folks really instilled a lot of things into us.

I'd just say one more thing about our class, that I meant to say before, that consistently through the years we've been a group that has stayed on. From the first window that we could get out—three years was our obligation—and every year up to 20, if you look at the retention rates for classes, we were always above the curve. So, someone did something right in instilling in us that sense of duty, to keep us aboard and serving through all those years; we all enjoyed it so much that we stayed on. With that combination of things, a large number have stayed throughout in the service and been around to continue that kind of cohesiveness and bonding that started us all.

Q: This goes back a little bit earlier, but were you prepared for the academic rigor of West Point? How was it academically?

A: I was prepared, but my transition was difficult. To explain that, Beast Barracks is difficult as you make the changeover. By the end of that seven-, eight-week period of Beast Barracks, you're really getting under control. Then you go back into academics, and it's like starting all over again. There are about five or six plebes for every firstclassman in Beast Barracks, and all of a sudden, when you start the academic year, the rest of the upper class comes back. There are now about three upperclassmen for every plebe. There are plebe duties, and those duties are rigorous and time consuming.

Then there is the new cadet chain of command, some of whom want to exercise that command and that control. The first class is taking you through, and they've gotten used to running plebes around. Now you also have the second class, some of whom are squad leaders and cadet corporals for the first time, exercising their obligations as they see them. Then you have the new yearlings, who just before were plebes and some of whom take it very easy and some of whom are very tough to begin with. So, it's almost overwhelming to the plebe, and meeting the requirements of academics and the fourth-class system together is very difficult.

You now find yourself at a table of ten folks. There used to be eight plebes, two upperclassmen. Now there are three plebes and seven upperclassmen, all of whom ask questions. The plebe has duties that used to be for just the two upperclassmen at the end of the table and now there are only three plebes, so you're the water corporal or you're the coffee corporal or you're the gunner—taking the stuff from the waiter and passing it down. You're responding to upperclass questions, and each time you screw up you pay in some form, either in further recitation of the many thousands of facts you're supposed to know or something else.

The same goes for your squad leader. My squad leader was very demanding, and when you didn't know the President's cabinet, you might get the opportunity to write it out 30 times that evening. Well, then you have a choice: you can study math, you can study French, you can study English, or you can try to keep off your squad leader's bad list by writing the cabinet down 30 times. So, you do the latter.

I was very high in my high school class in math, did very well in English, and was high in relative class standing. So, I would take one look at those subjects and say, "Well, I know that math, I know that English," and hardly touch the book in either of those subjects. I was really having difficulty with French. I mean, I just didn't understand because we started out totally in French at the outset. From the first day, we did not speak English in the classroom. So, the transition was very abrupt for somebody who'd never had French before. Consequently, I was floundering in French, floundering with my squad leader, and just wouldn't touch math and English.

After six weeks, I was deficient in French, deficient in English, and deficient in math. I still wasn't doing too well with my squad leader. It was almost a self-fulfilling prophecy of things. For example, the max grade was 3.0; 2.0 was passing. In three straight lessons on the slide rule I went 1.0, 1.2, and 0.8. That meant that I was three units deficient on a cumulative scale in just those three lessons. That takes a lot to make up when you can only make it up with grades between 2.0 and 3.0.

So, things were not going well, and I was discouraged and even had my parents' permission to resign because of the duress I was getting from the squad leader and all of this. I didn't want to resign. Then several others left. Out of that there was a table reshuffling. My squad leader had also been my table commandant, so I mean I was getting from him twice. He moved off, and I was moved out of that squad to more reasonable leaders who maybe thought Theory Y was as good as Theory X. I then got the kind of breathing space I needed to get things going.

We were re-sectioned in our classes too. At West Point at that time, you were sectioned into classes according to where you stood in the class in that particular subject at that time. So, in math I was sent to the 20th section of 24—that's how far down I was in math. There I met Lieutenant Colonel Jessie Fishback, Corps of Engineers, and he was a patient, fatherly, mentoring kind of person. Later on, his son would be a cadet, assistant S–3 for the second regiment when I was a Tac in the regiment, the exec/S–3. The saying goes, what goes around, comes around.

Lieutenant Colonel Jessie Fishback and his manner and the fact that I was catching up with the fourth-class system and getting along there with my squad leader allowed me the time to now understand I did need to pick up a math book, did need to look at it, needed to do the exercises and do the homework. When taps played at 2015, our lights went out. So, I would go out in the hall where there was a 50-watt bulb at the ceiling. I could sit there and try to squint at the text, and thus be up for another hour and a half and then be tired the next day. I mean, it was a self-unraveling kind of thing. All that began to go away, and I started to get my act together. By the end of the year I had moved up to the 1st section in mathematics.

So, to finally answer your question, the math I had in high school prepared me for math there, but I still had to do the homework and do the work for it. English was a similar situation. French I was never prepared for. I had taken Latin in high school. Everybody had said that was wonderful upbringing, got you ready for anything. It didn't get me ready for French. By the end of the two years, I finished about 100 out of 101 in French. Several of my classmates who'd stood higher than I were found deficient in French and left West Point. The 101st was a roommate of mine, Bob Blocher. The two of us worked together and got ourselves through, primarily by memorizing everything we could possibly memorize and going into the final exam, oral or written, with passages committed to memory. We could pull out parts of our memory if the right question came along and replicate the answer or give a very short oral talk about some aspects.

Q: Did you have to stay at West Point for the first 8 or 10 months, or did you get a chance to go home?

A: At that time we had no time to go home from the day we entered, 1 July, until the following year when we could leave for our summer vacation as a new yearling or thirdclassman. We had then what was called" Plebe Parent Christmas." My folks and brothers came to West Point to spend the Christmas holidays.

Q: So, there's a real break with civilian life in lots of different ways.

A: Oh, yes.

Q: Including a break with your family, at least for that first year. So, the second year and after, then, things are pretty dramatically different, I take it. Once you get through that first year.

A: They remained austere. At that time we still had very few weekends away; we got 2, I think, the second year; 4 the third year; 12 in the senior year. Those have been liberalized considerably today. Academics remained as tough. I mean, I had French the second year, and it was just as bad the second year as the first year.

So, it remained rigorous and austere, but we didn't have to grapple with the fourth-class system. It was a happy day when I stood there for the recognition ceremony during graduation week and all the upperclassmen that had me up against the wall all year came by and shook my hand and introduced themselves with a first name and—

Cadet Kem showed his parents and brothers the "sammy" (syrup) pitcher on the dining table in Washington Hall during his plebe Christmas at West Point in 1952. On the left were his brothers, David, Jan, and Bill. On the right, his parents, Dr. Charles E. and Janice Kem.

Q: Released you from the bondage of the first year.

A: Released me from bondage, that's right, and tried to assure me there was nothing personal that they'd done all year.

Q: Then, of course, later you're going to be on the other side?

A: That's right.

Q: Not like your squad leader the first year, I'm sure. That was an unusual—you think that was a really unusual situation? You said there were others that had a real problem with the same squad leader that you did.

A: He remained an S.O.B. throughout his military career.

Q: He's also even nameless, which is fine.

A: He hounded me even years later.

Q: Really? So, you keep running into people, negative and positive, in the rest of your career.

A: Right. Fortunately, most all are positive.

Q: I have one other thought that I don't think applies so much in the '50s. Again, going back to people I've interviewed who graduated in the '30s, they seemed to find Engineer Branch attractive because of the civil works activities, that if there were a long peacetime period, as there was in the '30s, the engineer officers still had interesting work to do. Was that a consideration at all in the '50s or had things changed quite a bit by then?

A: We didn't know much about the civil works. I didn't know much about it. I understood there was a bigger variety of things and opportunities in the Corps of Engineers. In our summer training at Camp Buckner we had three weeks of infantry training, a week of armor training, four days of artillery training, and three days of engineer training. Our class went down to Benning during one of our summers and spent a month at Fort Benning in a part of the basic infantry course.

Even though there were most enjoyable parts of that training, there was some thought that there must be something more than going down to the bottom of the hill and practice training going to the top of the hill, practice the attack and then digging in and defending. So, even with the troops having all the emphasis, as it should be, there was always the feeling there was a greater variety in the Corps of Engineers. Building dams, operating the locks along the Ohio River like I did later, those weren't obvious and weren't apparent to me in that branch decision-making process.

Later on, the Army brought in cadets for summer training to expose them to some of those missions to try to make the point that there is that kind of variety of experience later on in a career. Some of those cadets would go on to be armor officers and artillerymen, some would come to the Corps. I think there's a very big influence on a cadet in what he's exposed to and who he's exposed to, and those exposures can be positive or negative. For example, during my command of the 7th Engineer Brigade in Germany, we would get 20 to 22 cadets a summer. We would try to match those with battalions when they were going through a cycle of doing something. You wouldn't want to put the cadet in the company that was standing down for a month's maintenance, for example. You would like to put him or her in the battalion that's going into Grafenwöhr for its training, construction cycle. The experience they would have would be one of leading engineer troops in doing things of an operational training mission mode, rather than a housekeeping mode.

If a cadet did that in an engineer outfit, he'd be positively motivated. If he did that in an armor outfit, he'd be positively motivated. If he was in a housekeeping engineer mode or in a maintenance mode in an armor outfit, he could be very much turned off. Yet, that's part of the annual cycle, too, so those were realities.

The people were important. Where the people treat them like grown human beings, allow them to do something, where the kind of command atmosphere that's prevalent in that place is positive, the experience is positive. If the other company officers are all married and run off to their wives at night and don't try to assimilate the cadet, he or she may have a bad experience. If there are a couple of bachelors in the company or a married couple that brings the cadet under their wing and take him or her around and do whatever they're doing—in Germany, for instance, where we were—then it's going to be a very positive experience.

Q: Sounds a little like fraternity rush. I suppose there's a positive side to that too. People need to be given positive experiences.

Okay, any other things about the West Point years that we should cover?

A: Well, I should tell you one other anecdote, and that was one of the first "missions" that I undertook. It involved one other classmate that went into engineers later, John Wall. Several of us in Company I–1 decided that just before the Army–Navy football game we ought to have a foray down to the banks of the Severn (Annapolis) and be mischievous—professionally mischievous in keeping with the spirit of competition and all that. We cooked up a mission. Bob Speiser, Dick Sylvester, and I were the ones who did it, and we used John Wall as an intelligence source because he had spent a plebe year at Annapolis before he came to West Point—and spent a second plebe year there.

We wanted to go into the Naval Academy and paint Tecumseh, the Indian statue that sits right in the courtyard of Bancroft Hall where the middies live. We wanted to paint Tecumseh black, gray, and gold—Army's colors. So, we talked to John Wall to figure what's the best way: do you go in by sea by rowboat; go over the wall and infiltrate in? He was our advance eyes and ears and helped us come up with our battle plan.

We drove down one Saturday morning after taking a weekend of leave in late October, stopping off at Sylvester's house in Cherry Hill, New Jersey. His father was assigned at Fort Dix. We picked up the paint and so forth, which had been procured and left there for us. We then set forth and came on down to Annapolis. We arrived early, unfortunately, and went into one of the local diners in town, awaiting lights out and taps, all the things that would close shop at the academy, which I suppose was one o'clock but might have been midnight.

Then the waiter came over because we had gone past the hour, and said, "Psst, you guys are really middies, snuck out, aren't you?" We said, "Oh, no, we're not that." We then left and we were all in our cadet black parkas, but without the numbers and "USMA" showing. We were wearing just jeans, so we were dark. We then drove to a back fence; climbed over the wall; took with us the paint and some stencils and some spray cans of paint and some rock salt; and began our infiltration across academy grounds. We moved in leaps and bounds and very tactically as we moved across the dark areas—all of this not yet in the built-up area.

Then we came to a bridge that was lit; we had to dash across that. There was little traffic. We could see a car here or there. Got across the bridge and went to the parade field. We used the salt to put a big "A" right in front of the reviewing stand, trying to kill the grass so that in the spring there would be a new brilliant "A" sitting there. Never did find out if that worked or not.

Then we moved on in close to Bancroft Hall where we could see Tecumseh and everything else. We met our first obstacle. As in any kind of battle, things aren't always quite the way you expect them. So, it turned out to be both a disadvantage and an advantage—Tecumseh had already been painted in all of its war paint, ready to go. He had not been unveiled; the scaffolding and canvas were still around him. So, then we're sitting there in the shadows, just

away from the lights because Tecumseh can be seen easily with the lights coming out of Bancroft Hall, and it was really lit fairly well. We contemplated for a minute, and then it was apparent, after we checked it out, that we could get up inside the canvas. That was the advantage; we could work without being seen.

We matched out, and I came up with the first draw, which meant I got to paint first. I crawled up inside the canvas, pushed it away, and we then spray-painted Tecumseh black, gold, and gray from top to bottom. Meanwhile, while one painted the other two stood watch plus took the stencils and spray cans and painted "Go Army, Beat Navy" on some of the benches and other things around the area.

We finished painting Tecumseh and then exfiltrated back out the way we came, by leaps and bounds, back up over the wall. Before leaving town we drove back to the restaurant and walked in to speak to the same guy, this time sporting paint splattered all over our parkas, and said, "We just wanted to let you know we are not midshipmen. We're really cadets from West Point. We just painted the Indian." Then we took off and made our way out. We then sent a message back to the first captain, to be read at the mess hall at dinner, saying, "Sighted Indian. Sank same. Tecumseh now clad in war paint of Army." And signed it "I–1 firsties."

Well, we thought we'd come home heroes. Instead, we had to quietly sneak aboard because Lieutenant General Blackshear Bryan, the superintendent, thought that our actions were really bad. He'd promised the superintendent of the Naval Academy there wouldn't be any of this messing around that year, and he was looking for those people who had done this dastardly deed. Everybody was quiet, and our names were not revealed.

We'd always known if we'd been caught on the grounds we'd probably have gotten a haircut, been made to clean it up, been exposed to ridicule and such, but little did we know that we would have to sneak back into our own academy grounds and keep it quiet. We had only our great sense of satisfaction from that mission accomplished.

Q: The Army–Navy game seems to be a perennial as a memory of West Point years, a really big event. You graduated, then, in June of '56.

A: Yes.

Q: What was your next assignment after that?

A: My first assignment, of course, after schooling, was with the 3d Armored Division, 23d Engineers, in Hanau, Germany. To get there, we went to the basic engineer course at Fort Belvoir, reporting in there at the end of August, and then on to Ranger and Airborne Schools.

Of note, the Army was changing uniforms to Army green. We were fitted for pinks and greens when we left the academy. I was in the brown shoe army for a couple of months. Brown shoes went out the 1st of October and black shoes came in. Pinks and greens carried on yet another year. So, I entered the Army in a brown shoe era, and I leave now two months into the black epaulet era.

Q: Since you were at the Engineer School as commandant later, how would you compare the basic course you went through with the basic course of the Army in the late '80s?

A: Well, that's difficult to say. I would think we thought we did a better job later, but I'd have to say I thought they did a pretty good job on me as a new lieutenant. We probably had more practical experience later when I was commandant in the course than when I went through.

There was a thought, which was probably erroneous, back in our day that since we had been at West Point, we'd had all that field duty, we didn't need all that field duty at Fort Belvoir. The ROTC [Reserve Officers Training Corps] cadets did need it, it must have been decided, and so they went to a thing called a "BOMOP," which was an extra couple of weeks to get them caught up. I know in our cadet command these days, the "can-do" in the ROTC summer camps have taken on a whole different mission orientation. I don't know what it was in those days, so whether that was right or wrong I don't know. In any event, we didn't have much of that kind of field duty in the basic course. Later, when I was commandant, we sent everybody in the basic course, regardless of source of commission, out to Camp A. P. Hill to get the same kind of hands-on experience.

I thought in those days that we covered an awful lot of subjects and learned a lot about things. Some things that we didn't have later at Belvoir—couldn't teach them because of available hours—we got then. That now should pick up again with the school relocated to Fort Leonard Wood. I always thought as commandant that there ought to be a tracking at the end of the course, a couple of weeks devoted to the new assignment of the officer. For example, devoted to expectations in a division assignment or Corps combat battalion, or combat heavy battalions, and a topo track.

Our engineer basic course was pointed toward a bit more of the career aspects back in the '50s, whereas when I was commandant, it was oriented to being a platoon leader. In both cases you were going to be a platoon leader. In neither case did we have the armored personnel carriers at Fort Belvoir so that we could practice for someone like me and others who were going to armored or mech divisions. So, everything we did of a practical nature was wheeled. At Fort Leonard Wood the idea would be to teach the lieutenant the kinds of things to expect generally, and in a couple of weeks, if he was going to a mech division, let him go through some heavy division kind of exercises. If he was going to a light division, light division kind of drills. If he or she was going topo, a specific orientation there. If he or she was going to a combat heavy battalion, then put him/her into the "million dollar hole" [construction equipment training] at Leonard Wood and have that experience.

When I was a lieutenant at Belvoir, we had the "mech and tech" department with all the construction equipment where we got to see and operate that equipment. By the time I was back as commandant, the mech and tech department had already moved to Leonard Wood, so we didn't have that. As a lieutenant I drove a grader, I drove a dozer, I operated all these kinds of things, but we couldn't do that for lieutenants when I was commandant. You can now do them again at Fort Leonard Wood.

Nevertheless, I thought that in combination, West Point and the Engineer School and Airborne and Ranger Schools prepared me very well for my first duty assignment.

Q: The basic course was longer then, wasn't it?

A: I believe so. Two and a half months then. It was the 1st of August we arrived. We left about middle of October. Of course, now a lot of cadets go to airborne during their time in ROTC or at West Point. Then, you did not do that. We left Belvoir to go straight to Ranger School. Thought we had two days to make it, but when we reported in on Sunday night we found out we were already two days late. Our infantry brethren were in the basic infantry course, and so we would be running through the Harmony Church area doing our physical training, and we'd find the Tom Griffins and Norm Schwarzkopfs all sitting over there on the ground taking a break from their instruction and taunting us as we did this. Of course, their time was going to come.

Q: Now, did you all go to airborne and ranger?

A: No, you had to volunteer if you wanted to do that, but essentially most folks went airborne. We also had our Army aviation as a choice. You could go to two of the three.

Q: Two of the three.

A: People opted for one or two. There were different combinations, but certainly not so many went ranger. Most, as I mentioned, went airborne.

Q: So, that was the influence of the World War II airborne generals, Maxwell Taylor and a couple of other people of the '50s. I've heard it commented that there was a lot of airborne influence in the Army in the '50s.

A: Well, there always has been.

Q: So, those schools were shorter than the basic course?

A: Yes. Airborne at that time was three weeks long, but then you stayed for a week of jumpmaster. Now you don't get the jumpmaster at Benning; you get it back at Bragg if you go to the 82d. The ranger course at that time was seven weeks long. We didn't have the desert phase as they do now. We had two weeks at Fort Benning, followed by two and a half weeks in the swamps out of Eglin Air Force Base, and two and a half weeks in the mountains out of Dahlonega, Georgia.

Q: So, you went to the airborne course—that would be about the 1st of the year, January?

A: I was in Ranger School from mid-October till mid-December. I spent a week at Benning attached to the airborne department, then home for Christmas leave. I came back and started airborne on the order of 4, 5, 6 January. Airborne lasted through January. I took leave after that. My recollection is reporting to Germany on 2 March.

I should say one more thing about Ranger School. Ranger School was one of the experiences that left its mark on me for what came later. You learn a lot in Ranger School about yourself, about when the going gets tough how you still keep going. No matter how tired, how hungry, you can marshal some extra reserve. There were those days when you hadn't been to sleep for a day and you hadn't had a meal for 18, 19 hours, when you still had to exert yourself. There were the times when you just finished an exhausting two-day problem and you knew you were ready for and were going to get a good meal, a good breakfast, and they said before that, though, you've got to climb a telephone pole, walk across a telephone pole mounted horizontally above a stream. Getting there, you'd notice that there was a flat board on the pole, but then the board stopped and you still had about 6 feet of just rounded log to cross, and this is 25 feet in the air. Crossing that, you then had to climb a slack rope up to a taut line that was coming back toward the start. After having that explained, all of a sudden, the instructor pointed to me and I was the first to go.

Then when I was just about to approach the end of the flat board 25 feet up—and this, remember, is after two days with hardly any sleep, paddling down the river—I thought I had nothing left. As I was about to cross the rounded part of the log they threw artillery simulators into the water and plumes of water shot up with noise. It was distracting and they were hollering at me, and all of a sudden they said to hang from the taut line, then said, "drop" and I went into the water.

When that was accomplished as a group, then we got breakfast. The point was just teaching self-confidence, no matter where you are and what the circumstances. Another strong message was that the mission needs to be accomplished. Focus on the mission; accomplish the mission.

Another lesson, and one that's really stayed with me through the years—and one that we preach in the Army in recent years—is that you can have very good realistic training but you should simulate as little as possible. So, there's a great benefit to realistic training, and in Ranger School they work hard at realistic training. If you want to take a boat and you want to paddle a river, you do it. You don't assume the river doesn't exist or the bridge will come forward. If you have to get across the river, you either have to bridge it or wade it or something. I mean, you've got to do the real thing with what you've got.

So, that stayed with me as I tried to create training throughout the rest of my career. That is, you want to make it tough, you want to make it realistic, and you ought not to let somebody assume the problem away or simulate the problem away because certain things aren't available. Make those things available. Make training realistic.

When I ran platoon tests three years later when I was assistant S–3 of the 23d Engineers, 3d Armored Division, we built the simulators and manufactured explosives even though they didn't exist in training stocks so we could give somebody a device and say, "You must tie these to the bridge and you must pull the lighter and you must go and set off the explosive, and you must do it before you're interdicted by the aggressor. Only then do you pass." It would have been very easy to say, "Well, you just go out there and explain how you would

do it." Not realistic; so we had devices there so you had to go do the job and the unit had to be trained to do it.

So, Ranger School taught me that you don't need to compromise with training. You can make it realistic and then you get full value from it. So, don't compromise; keep your standards high for training, and then the unit will benefit from that.

23d Engineers, 3d Armored Division

Q: So, you reported as a platoon leader?

A: Yes, I reported to Germany to be a platoon leader in C Company of the 23d Engineer Battalion.

Q: 23d Engineers. Who was your company commander?

A: Tommy G. Smith was my company commander. Started off with a bang.

Q: What was it like being a platoon leader?

A: Well, it's something you look forward to with some relish. It was a super experience. I have to say once again how Ranger School and West Point, the sense of duty, the sense of mission that you got out of those places, make you ready and confident in what you can do.

The day I arrived in Germany was Rose Monday. It was the last celebrating day of Fasching. Germans go bonkers celebrating the pre-Lenten season. My classmate, Chuck Brinkley, had gone straight to airborne and come over. Another classmate, Ernie Ruffner, was also in the battalion with me. Chuck was a bachelor and already well at home. He said, "Come on out, we're going to a party tonight. It's the last night of Fasching." So, I spent my very first night in Germany out till three o'clock in the morning at a big Fasching party at the Stadthalle, got up the next day to meet the battalion commander for the first time, and luckily he was out with the mumps.

They told me I was assigned to C Company. I went there and the company commander wasn't there either. He was off. Nor were there any platoon leaders or an executive officer around, just the first sergeant. He was really ill at ease because the division sent down a no-notice first aid inspection team that morning to check out C Company. The company was to turn out 1 officer and 3 to 4 noncommissioned officers and 20 to 25 soldiers to take this first aid test.

I was the only officer available and I had just arrived; should they or should they not include me? So, the first sergeant asked me, "Well, what do you think?" I said, "Well, yeah, let's go